

“Honor your father and your mother, as Hashem, your G-d, commanded you, so that your days will be lengthened.” (5:16)

Rashi says that the commandment to honor one's parents was first given at Marah. Does it really make a difference where Hashem first commanded *Klal Yisrael* in regard to this *mitzvah*? Perhaps this teaches us that our entire approach to the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v'Eim* is wrong. There are those who think that we have an obligation to honor our parents out of a sense of gratitude for what they have done for us. They bring us into the world, clothe and feed us, arrange our education and provide for our basic material needs. This is not the Torah's perspective on the *mitzvah*. One is obligated to honor his parents, regardless of the benefit – or lack thereof – that he has received. We are enjoined to perform this *mitzvah* because “it was commanded to us at Marah.” What occurred in Marah that was so unique, yet endemic to the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud Av v'Eim*?

In Marah, Hashem began sustaining us miraculously: water from a stone; quail from Heaven; our clothes did not become ruined, the *manna* descended from Heaven. In short, everything came to us “special delivery” from Hashem. There was no need for the medium called “parents.” They did not have to labor to earn a living to support their children, because everything was served to them on a silver platter from Hashem. They were commanded in the *mitzvah* of honoring their parents, specifically in Marah – a place where their parents did not have even a supporting role in sustaining their children. Hashem's miracles were overtly manifest, so that all would see and benefit from them. This teaches us that our relationship to our parents and respecting them has nothing to do with what we receive from them; it has to do with Hashem. He commanded us to honor them.

This thesis is especially crucial in today's society, when some children might feel that their parents neglect them. Let us ask ourselves, are they really wrong? Do we spend as much time with our children as our parents spent with us? Today's society makes great demands on our time. The economy leaves much to be desired, making it much more difficult to earn a living. The result is less time at home, and a father and mother who are under greater pressure – with less patience for their children. In the larger communities where Judaism flourishes, we sometimes have to attend a wedding, *Bar-Mitzvah*, parlor meeting or Chinese auction almost every night of the week. For those who are not that socially inclined, or simply cannot afford the expense, being “stuck at home” becomes a source of depression. Then there is also a *shiur* to attend, a *chavrusa* with whom to study, a lecture that will change our life. There is always something. Who loses out in the shuffle? Our children. While it is indeed true that *Kibbud Av v'Eim* is a *mitzvah*, when we are in need of their time and good will, our children will remember how much time we gave to them.

Rarely does the Torah emphasize the concomitant reward for performing a *mitzvah*. *Kibbud Av v'Eim* is an exception. The Torah tells us that for honoring our parents, we will merit longevity. The word used by the Torah is *yaarichun*, lengthen [your days]. Interestingly, the Torah does not write *yosifun*, which would mean adding [days]. Is there a significant lesson to be derived from here? I

recently heard a practical explanation for this choice of words from my uncle. To lengthen one's days is to maintain the youthful vibrancy that one had when he was younger. To add days, however, means to add years to one's life. Growing "old" is not the same thing as growing "older."

The aging process can be invigorating, challenging and satisfying. It can also be depressing – both physically and emotionally. *Arichas yamim* should be defined as lengthening one's days, giving added life to the youthful exuberance of one's youth. When you see an octogenarian who is both healthy in mind and body, whose visage and perspective on life bespeaks a man twenty years younger – that is *arichas yamim*. His days of youth were lengthened. This is a reward for a son or daughter who has dedicated himself or herself to serving their parents appropriately – ensuring that their parents were able to maintain their own youth without being overwhelmed with responsibilities and obligations.

What does *kavod/kabed*, honor, really mean – especially in the context of contemporary society? *Horav S. R. Hirsch, z.l.*, suggests that *kavod*, which is also related to the word *kaveid*, heavy, is the expression of the spiritual and moral worth of a being. Thus, *kabed* would mean demonstrating our estimation of the value of our parents. The *mitzvah* of *Kabed es avicha v'es imecha* instructs us to demonstrate in every way, in our entire demeanor, to our parents how thoroughly we are imbued with the great significance that Hashem has given our parents in our lives. Parents, as Hashem's emissaries for carrying out His wishes in regard to their offspring, are granted importance by virtue of this transmission.

We suggest that *kabed* goes one step further. With the same idea in mind, I think the Torah is teaching us to add importance/prominence to our parents by seeking to raise our estimation of them. All too often we hear of children commenting derogatorily about their parents in comparison to someone else: "My father's job is not as important as his neighbor's." "My mother does not do very much" and so on and so forth. We are enjoined to look for the good, the significant, the praiseworthy, the honorable aspects of our parents, so that we can add significance to them. As our esteem and estimation of them increases, so will the *kavod* we give them.

Quite possibly, the most difficult aspect both physically and emotionally of giving proper respect to parents is when they age, become ill, or infirm. For a child to view his once strong, proud parent in a situation of extreme pain, weakness, or infirmity can be devastating. The pain is magnified when the illness is of an emotional nature. That is the price, however, we pay for love – the love we have received and the love we are to give. It is not a duty that we are allowed to renege, regardless of the pain associated with it. When I once returned from an exhausting trip to Chicago to spend some time with my mother, *AH.*, a friend once told me, "Remember, your children are watching you." When we carry out our responsibility towards our parents with a sense of gratitude, reverence, affection and admiration, we can aspire that our children will do the same for us – someday.